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AUTHOR	Kizer, Betty
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ABSTRACT

Alfred Adler devised a theory that was holistic, social, teleological, and phenomenological. Adler believed that the basis of problems with children originated in the child's inability to cooperate with society, feelings of inferiority, and a lack of a goal in life. Adler felt the child's life should be examined through the child's eyes. Aggressive behavior was an indication of a hostile environment. The child is aggressive because he is afraid if he does not act aggressively, others will. Rudolf Dreikurs clarified and refined Adler's original work on family counseling thus making Adlerian family counseling a viable force in counselor education throughout the United States and Canada. Adlerian counselors are viewed as educators and most of the problems that children have are problems of education rather than illnesses. Alderians recommend democratic child rearing practices not only for aggressive children, but for all children. The goal in the parent-child relationship is to foster cooperation. Alderian therapy has retained its place in psychology because of its common sense approach and concern for the individual as well as the emphasis placed on education of parents. (ABL)

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Adlerian Therapy with Aggressive Children

Betty Kizer

Psychology Department

Eastern New Mexico University

Portales, New Mexico

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Abstract

This paper reviews Alfred Adler's approach to therapy with children in general. It will also look at the method Adler used to educate aggressive children and their parents in order to help them reach their full potentials. Finally, the modern proponents of Adlerian therapy and their methods are examined.

Adlerian Therapy with Aggressive Children

Alfred Adler devised a theory that was holistic, social, teleological, and phenomenological. He believed that life was problem solving and each individual inherently strives to reach a goal in life. Adler introduced community outreach programs and family therapy to psychological practice. According to Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956), Adler is not given the recognition that he deserved, perhaps because of his writing style and the difficulty most people have in reading his work. However, Adlerian therapy has grown in usage since World War II and continues to flourish today (Mosak, 1973; Adler, 1956).

Adler's Theory of Problem Children

Adler believed that the basis of problems with children originated in the child's inability to cooperate with society, his/her feelings of inferiority, and a lack of a goal in life. Adler felt that it was important to examine the whole child and his/her style of life. The situation should be looked at through the eyes of the child. The therapist must find the connection between the disturbing behavior and the life style of the child.

The parents of a problem child must be approached carefully, they must never be reproached for their

rearing of the child, even when it is justified. Adler taught that the therapist must win the parents before the child can be helped. Adler advised using the words "perhaps" or "I think" when making recommendations to the parents about their child, and to avoid direct confrontations with the parents.

Dealing with the problem child is easier for the therapist than it is for the parents or teachers according to Adler, because the therapist does not have to live with him/her every day. A counselor must gain the confidence of the child so that the child will listen and understand what the therapist says to him/her. It is necessary to teach the child that he/she has a problem in dealing with life and to offer suggestions as to how he/she can correct that problem. Adler advises the therapist to be honest and straightforward with the child. The child should never be discouraged or told he/she is stupid or bad or he/she will soon become convinced that this is so.

Adler looked at disorders in the child, including the history of the child, his/her fears, when the trouble started and what preceded it. The child's social relationships, ability to make friends, conditions at home, diseases in the family, deaths that affected the child, and the child's position in the

family are important in determining the root of the child's problem. The child's interests, recollections and dreams, discouraged behavior, organ inferiorities, inferiority complex, and positive assets help the therapist ascertain the best therapy for the child (Adler, 1956).

Aggressive Children

Adler felt that aggressive behavior was an indication of a hostile environment. The child who is an aggressor acts this way because he/she is afraid that if he/she is not aggressive, that others will be. This type of child is disobedient because he/she feels that obedience is a sign of subordination and that showing emotions is a sign of weakness (Adler, 1956).

Adler cites the case of a five-year-old who had killed three children and yet showed no regret or recognition of the depravity of her deeds. She was the youngest child of a number of boys and as such was a spoiled, pampered child. When a baby sister was born she was pushed to the background. She developed a hatred for her younger sister that she could not act upon because the parents guarded the baby so carefully. She saw all younger girls as her enemies and the reasons that she was no longer pampered. This type of case requires a long time and special training in order for the child to be able to take an active part in

society (Adler, 1955). Adler, (1958) describes the results of an authoritarian family,

> In the whole conduct of the family life there is no call for the use of authority; and it is unfortunate if one member is especially prominent or considered more that the others. If the father is high-tempered and tries to dominate the rest of the family, the boys will get a false view of what is expected from a man (p. 133).

A boy, the oldest child in a father dominated, family was devoted to his father. The father thought the boy was a genius and the boy accepted these high expectations as a matter of course. Then, when the boy was five years, old a sister was born. The father's affections were directed toward the baby sister and the boy began to have an overpowering urge to climb up on his father's shoulders, stand over his head, and break open his skull. From then on he was troubled by gruesome and filthy thoughts. He believed that he had failed to live up to his father's expectations, therefore he had been replaced in his father's affections by a sister (Adler, 1970).

Adler believed that the child who feels undervalued and inferior will live with resentment, tension, and a powerful motivation to compensate for inferiority, sometimes through violence. The child's

self confidence is continuously eroded in society, he/she will have few successes in school or in life so the poor self-image perpetuates itself. Adler relates the story,

> A teen-ager who knifed and killed another youth in the streets of London was asked by the judge why he acted as he did. The reply was, 'He turned round and looked at me when we was in the pictures.' If one is destitute of any kind of self-esteem, then the smallest insult can become an unendurable outrage (Adler, 1973, p.65).

Adler felt that the answer to the problem of violence was to provide a total environment for the children, one in which the child's self-confidence and self-esteem are continuously sustained by love, encouragement, challenge, and stimulation. If the home does not provide these things then the schools must, but it is much better if the two cooperate in providing the proper environment for children (Adler, 1973).

Adler tried to achieve this environment for the children of Vienna where he established over 30 child guidance clinics which served as models for the child guidance movement worldwide. The sessions in these clinics were held in public, psychologist, teachers, and parents were allowed to sit in and participate. Adler felt that this impressed upon the child that

his/her behavior was not just his/her private affair but was of public concern (Adler,1963).

Modern Adlerians

Rudolf Dreikurs clarified and refined Adler's original work on family counseling thus making Adlerian family counseling a viable force in counselor education throughout the United States and Canada. Dreikurs and his students emphasized change through an understanding of the intent of individual behavior. The family has undergone many changes in the past 25 years with an increase in one-parent families, reconstituted families, blended families, step-families, and foster families, but, even with all of these changes the family is still the social unit which rears, socializes, and educates the children. Adlerian counselors today are aware of the need to preserve the family as an institution that will provide children with survival skills suited for the future (Christensen & Schramski, 1983).

Adlerian counselors are viewed as educators and most of the problems that children have are problems of education rather than illnesses. Therefore, the treatment of a child with problems means educating the family as a whole. The first step is to gather information about the family, usually during an intake interview prior to the appointment for counseling.

The first interview is usually with the counselor and the parents. At this time the children are involved in free-play under observation and supervision in a playroom. During the initial interview the counselor has the chance to model the relaxed interactional procedures that should be the hallmark of each family interview. The idea of sharing the education of the family who is being counseled with the audience is stressed during this first interview.

The counselor then begins to gather information, starting with establishing the family constellation, this includes birth order, miscarriages or stillbirths, serious childhood illness, and others in the family. The counselor then goes on to identify the problem, ascertain a description of the problem, obtain a specific example and establish parental response to the problem. The parents are then asked to describe a typical day for the counselor in order to help the counselor understand the total home situation and the parent-child relationship.

At this point the counselor shares his/her diagnostic hypothesis with the parents, then the parent interview is terminated. The counselor then consults with the playroom observer about the actions of the children. After this the children are interviewed and the counselor begins to gather information about the

sibling interrelationships. The concerns of the parents are discussed with the children and they are asked about their goals in life. The counselor then shares with the children his/her hypothesis about what is going on in the family and the recommendations that will be made to the parents.

The child interview is terminated and the children go back to the playroom, then the parents return for the parent education and recommendation portion. The counselor shares the conclusions about the dynamics of the family and tries to provide a new understanding of the family situation to the parents. The counselor usually gives the family one or two tasks to work on until the next counseling session. The session is then terminated and arrangements made for the next session (Christensen & Schramski, 1983; Nikelly, 1971).

Recommendations for Aggressive Children

Adlerians recommend democratic child rearing practices not only for aggressive children, but for all children.

> Adlerians feel that traditional, autocratic child rearing practices are obsolete and that new principles of parent-child relationships based on mutual respect must be taught. Thus, the Adlerian therapist is primarily an educator whether he is

working in a one to one relationship, as a group leader or as a counselor in a family education center (Mosak, 1973, p. 166).

A study by Kern and Wheeler indicates few parents admit that their children have problems or that if they do, that the parents have any difficulty handling their children. Through Adlerian therapy, parents can change from an autocratic to a democratic approach to child rearing. In this, the change is applied to techniques, not to the behavior. It involves a here-and-now approach rather than dealing with behavior that has already occurred. The Adlerian method is to move toward child rearing practices which are based on mutual trust and respect, on encouragement, on valuing the child as a person and on the use of natural and logical consequences (Kern & Wheeler, 1977).

Adlerians advise parents to change their emotional responses to their children, they need to stop feeling annoyance, anger, hurt or despair. The goal in the parent-child relationship is to foster cooperation. To change parent's responses, it is suggested that the parents avoid their first impulse and do the unexpected, refuse to be bothered when the child misbehaves. The parents must watch the tone of voice because it is the best indicator of attitude and feelings. The child should be given a choice of

actions. If he/she does not make the correct choice he/she must suffer the consequences (McKay & Christensen, May, 1978). In the case of aggressive siblings Buskila & Gerzi, (1977) suggest benign neglect. Since the main cause for fighting among siblings is a bid for the attention of the parents and a strengthening of their self-image in the family, it is suggested that parents not interfere in the fights. Interference only worsens the conflict and keeps the children from learning how to resolve their conflicts by themselves.

Conclusion

Adlerian therapy has retained it's place in psychology because of it's common sense approach and it's concern for the individual as well as the emphasis placed on education of parents. The holistic view of therapy has had a great influence on helping families with problems. Adler's child rearing theories and his emphasis on cooperation between schools and parents are just as applicable today as they were when Adler devised his system.

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